**Hazmat**

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Jennie didn’t hear the crash or the sirens, but when she got off the late bus at the corner she could see the flashing lights in the distance, blue and red and yellow, on the highway behind her house. If the sun had been shining she probably would never have seen them, but the rain had only just stopped and the skies were still dark and threatening, so that the lights were plainly visible.

She knew her mother was expecting her inside, and she didn’t want her to worry, but she wanted to see what was happening, and it would only take a few minutes, so she dropped her school-bag on the porch and ran on around to the back yard.

Her parents hated the highway; they complained about it all the time, and Jennie always said she didn’t like it either, but the truth was that she found it fascinating. At night she would watch the cars from her bedroom window, the lines of red and white lights flowing by in either direction, the white turning red as they passed. During the daytime, when she played out back, she would sometimes stop just to listen to the steady rumble of traffic, the trucks and cars streaming by endlessly.

Where did they all come from, where did they all go, what were all those people who drove them like? Did they have families, and children, and homes?

She ran down the slope, and hopped from tussock to stone to cross the ditch; she could hear voices on the embankment ahead, and the colored lights were much brighter now. A raindrop splashed in the puddle beside her; apparently the storm was not over at all, but had merely paused.

The mesh fence lifted up easily — it wasn’t supposed to, Jennie knew, but it always had. She squatted down and slipped underneath.

Then she paused and looked back at the house. If her mother saw her on the other side of the fence she would scream, and she’d call the highway department and have the fence fixed, and Jennie would be grounded for weeks. As it was, her mother was always worrying about a truck missing the curve and rolling down into their yard, and her father had been writing letters demanding that a proper sound-barrier wall be built.

There was no sign of her mother.

She began to climb the embankment; it was steep enough that she had to go up on all fours, hanging onto the clumps of grass and the tough brown weeds.

She could hear engines running, and tires hissing on pavement, and men shouting to one another. Something was dripping down from the shoulder, something brown, trickling down into the grass, just a foot or so away; she leaned over and sniffed at it.

It had a funny smell — not oil or gasoline or anything she recognized. She reached out a finger and poked at the dirt, deflecting the stream.

A drop splashed onto her finger, and she quickly wiped it on the grass. Most of the stuff came off, and it wasn’t hot, it didn’t sting or anything. She looked critically at her finger, then shrugged and resumed her climb.

A moment later she peered up over the edge of the embankment and saw the accident.

A big silver and red tank truck had turned over, impaling itself on the guard rail just a few yards from where she crouched. The brown stuff had leaked from the tank; there was a pool of it half on the pavement, half on the shoulder.

All around it was a broad empty space; the highway had been closed off, with flares and sawhorses and blinkers making a big ring around the overturned truck. Around the markers was another ring, of vehicles and uniformed men — police cars, fire trucks, rescue trucks, tow trucks.

None of them ventured near the wreck, though; they all hung back. Then, as Jennie watched, she saw two men in baggy protective suits and soft helmets emerging from one of the surrounding trucks, carrying some sort of fancy equipment that they held out in front of them, as if to ward off danger, as they stepped into the circle.

Jennie wondered what was going on; she followed the curve of the marked-off area around, and realized she was well inside the circle it would have formed had the arc been continued. The circle was not complete, though, because nobody had extended it down the steep slope of the embankment.

This, she knew, was not the usual way of handling overturned trucks; she felt a twinge of fear, and took another look at the tanker.

There was a yellow stripe down the side; a guardrail post had punched into it. There were big black letters on the stripe, but she couldn’t read them because of the angle.

There were two diamond-shaped signs on the back of the truck, the end nearest her; those she could make out more clearly. One had scraped on something. That one bore a design of interlocked rings and a word starting with BI and ending in ZARD; the middle portion was illegible.

The other warning sign was still clear — sideways, but clear and legible.

It said HAZMAT.

Jennie blinked. What did “hazmat” mean?

Whatever it meant, it sounded dangerous, and she didn’t like the look of any of this, and her mother would be waiting for her. Besides, the rain was picking up. She had been looking for a little excitement, but this was scary, not exciting. It was no fun at all.

She turned and began half-climbing, half-sliding back down to the ditch. She ducked under the fence and scampered up to her own yard, then ran across, out the driveway, and back around to the front door.

“Was the bus late?” her mother asked, when she stepped in.

“No,” she said, “I just walked slow.”

“In the rain?” Her mother looked up from the newspaper.

“Well, it wasn’t raining, mostly,” Jennie explained. “It just now started again.”

Her mother glanced at the fat drops rattling against the windows. “Oh,” she said. “How was practice?”

“Okay,” Jennie said.

“Good,” her mother answered. Then she returned her attention to the paper.

Jennie threw her bag and jacket in the hall closet and hurried up the two flights of stairs to her room in the attic. She threw herself on the bed and stared out her window.

The lights were still flashing, and she could see the overturned truck and all the surrounding equipment; people were running back and forth, hunched against the rain. No one entered that inner circle without a protective suit, but there were at least a dozen people in suits now, some of them with shovels and buckets, some hauling a big tank on wheels. A group of three was applying a patch to the hole in the tank’s side; she couldn’t see how they were fastening it. Most of the rest seemed to be trying to collect the brown stuff that had leaked out, scooping it into buckets, shoveling up the dirt that had partially absorbed it, working quickly before the rain could dilute and spread it.

There were even more police cars than before, and traffic had backed up as far as she could see — the southbound side of the highway was completely blocked, and the police were setting up barricades on the northbound side, as well.

Jennie looked at her finger, a bit worried, but it seemed all right. The brown stuff was gone; there was just the faintest little red spot where it had been.

She’d wiped it off in time, she was sure.

She forgot about it and watched as the clean-up continued.

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The rain had stopped. The southbound lanes were still blocked, but traffic was being directed across the median; one of the northbound lanes had been separated out and was carrying southbound traffic for a few hundred yards, until it could cut back across the median beyond the accident.

Some of the emergency vehicles were gone. A crane had arrived, righted the tank truck, and departed. The men in protective suits had finished their clean-up — but only after a team had carried in a jackhammer and torn up the pavement where the spill had been. Jennie’s parents had heard the hammer while eating supper, and her father had gone into another of his tirades about how he hated living so close to the highway.

Jennie had eaten her dinner, watched TV, played a few videogames, and now she was getting into her nightgown, watching out the window as she did.

Her right forefinger was itching; the skin was reddish from the first knuckle to the tip, and was starting to peel in one spot — the spot where the brown stuff had touched her. It didn’t actually hurt, but she wasn’t happy about it.

“Hazmat,” the warning sign had said, and there had been that thing like four circles arranged in a triangle.

She settled the hem of her nightgown into place and started toward the bathroom to brush her teeth. Then she changed direction and bounced down the stairs.

Her father was in his room, grumbling to himself as he pawed through a bureau drawer looking for something.

“Daddy?” she called.

He looked up. “Yes, Jennie?”

“What’s hazmat?”

He straightened up and turned to face her. “What’s what?”

“Hazmat,” she said. “I saw it on the side of a truck.”

“Spell it.”

“H, A, Z, M, A, T.”

“Oh!” he said. “That’s not a word; it’s an abbreviation.”

“What’s it stand for?”

“Hazardous Material,” he said. “What kind of a truck was it?”

“A tank truck. Like the one that tipped over on the highway.”

Her father glanced in the direction of the highway. “Is that what all the fuss was about over there?”

She nodded. “You can see from my window,” she said.

He grunted. “Well, you stay away from anything that says Haz Mat on it,” he told her, pronouncing it as two separate words.

“Yes, Daddy. There was another sign on it with a funny symbol.”

“What’d it look like?”

“Like... like three circles in a triangle, except where the corners of the triangle would be there were breaks in the circles, and they were thicker in the middle, and there was a fourth circle on top, in the middle.”

Her father needed a moment to puzzle this out, but after a few seconds he said, “I think that’s the biohazard symbol.” He anticipated her next question. “Biological hazard. Germs, or something.”

“Oh,” she said, unhappily. She looked down at her finger and bit her lip.

“Something wrong?” her father asked.

She remembered what he had said last time he’d seen her playing near the highway. “No, Daddy,” she said. “I think I’ll wash my hands.”

“All right,” he said. “And don’t forget to brush your teeth.”

“I won’t. Good night, Daddy.”

“Good night, sweetheart.”

She washed her hands. She washed them thoroughly, with two different kinds of soap, and she scrubbed hard with the scratchy old washcloth that she didn’t like but which generally got things cleaner.

Then she went to bed, but her finger still itched, and the redness was spreading to the rest of her hand.

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There were brown spots on the sheets, ugly brown stains, and Jennie knew they were where her right hand had rested during the night. The whole hand was red and swollen now, the red reaching halfway to her elbow, and the skin of her forefinger was peeling away in thick white flakes. Pale fluid was starting to ooze from the flesh beneath. The hand throbbed with dull pain; the finger itself had gone completely numb.

She no longer worried about getting in trouble for where she had been; she screamed, “Mommy!”

Someone called something downstairs, but Jennie couldn’t make it out. She ran to the door and leaned out over the stairwell, shrieking, “Mommy!”

She heard a rattle, and footsteps, and then her mother was there on the stairs, looking up at her. “What is it?” she asked.

Jennie held out her hand, wordlessly.

Her mother sucked in air, shocked. “You need a doctor,” she said. “Get dressed, while I call.” She turned away.

Jennie nodded and tried to obey, but when she pulled a sleeve over her right hand she screamed at the pain, and she couldn’t bring herself to fasten the buttons.

When she had her clothes more or less on, and her nightgown was a puddle of fabric on the carpet, she started to throw herself on the bed — and then stopped at the sight of the brown stains.

They were spreading.

She backed away from the bed, whimpering, and started down the steps. She couldn’t hold the railing, which was on the right.

At the bottom, in the second floor hall, she could hear her mother’s voice talking on the phone downstairs. She sounded upset.

That made Jennie even more frightened; if her mother was worried, then it was serious, not just some normal childhood thing like chicken pox.

She looked at her hand; brownish stuff was starting to seep from her finger where the skin had peeled away, where the pale fluid had been just a moment before. It looked uncomfortably like the brown stuff that had come from the truck. She gave a small, terrified squeak and hurried on down the next flight of stairs.

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“I’ve never seen anything like it,” the emergency room doctor, Dr. Williams, said, staring at Jennie’s hand — or rather, at what had been Jennie’s hand just hours ago. Now it was an oozing, misshapen mass of brownish-red flesh, most of it covered with a thick layer of brown goo. Bone protruded from the five lumps that had once been fingers; the flesh had been eaten away.

Jennie could no longer move her hand or her fingers, could no longer feel anything more than a few inches below the shoulder. She couldn’t stand to look at her right arm at all; mostly she just kept her eyes shut, squeezing out tears of terror and pain.

Her shoulder ached, and her chest and face felt hot, and there was a faint, dull throbbing where Dr. Williams had, within minutes of seeing her, shot her arm full of every antibiotic he had available.

They had asked her how it started, and she’d told them about the tank truck, but they hadn’t done anything about it; Dr. Williams had been too busy with his needles and salves, trying to slow down the spreading damage.

They had not been able to get Jennie’s shirt off; the sleeve’s fabric was stuck to her arm, and any attempt to tear it free resulted in screaming agony.

“I’m going to see if I can find out what was in that truck,” Dr. Williams said, “but unless they’ve got some kind of miracle, I think the whole arm will have to come off.”

Jennie’s mother sucked in her breath, but Jennie pursed her lips, took a glance at the ruin of her hand, and nodded.

“Hurry,” she said.

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They were going to cut off her arm.

This wasn’t some TV show, like “Agents of SHIELD,” or like the end of “The Empire Strikes Back,” where they would just put on a robot one and she’d be as good as new. This was real life, and her arm was going to be gone, she’d just have an empty sleeve pinned up to her shoulder like that man she saw on the bus once, or the guy on “Dancing with the Stars.” She’d be like that for the rest of her life.

But if they didn’t cut it off, she was going to be dead, like that cat that got run over, or the squirrels on the highway. Sometimes people talked about dead kids going to Heaven, but Jennie didn’t think she believed that stuff, and wasn’t in any hurry to find out. Dying was scary, even scarier than letting them cut off her arm... if cutting off her arm would work.

The way that stuff spread, just that one little tiny spot turning into this — wouldn’t it already be all over, inside her? Wasn’t it already too late?

She whimpered. She was going to die, she knew it.

Her mother was standing there watching, and not saying it would all be okay, and that was as frightening as anything else, because her mother always said it would be all right, even when Jennie couldn’t see how — but this time she wasn’t saying it; when Jennie whimpered she just bit her lip and stared at her daughter.

And she wasn’t picking Jennie up, wasn’t hugging her, and Jennie knew why — she didn’t want to touch the brown goo. Jennie looked down at the shirt she had never managed to button all the way up because her right hand had hurt too much.

She could see her chest, the pale skin damp with sweat — and the little brown spots that seemed to be spreading as she watched.

Cutting off her arm wouldn’t help. It was too late.

“Mommy?” she said.

Her mother looked at her, followed her gaze down to those spots on her chest, and gasped. “Jennie,” she said helplessly.

Then Dr. Williams was standing in the door, but not entering the room.

“It’s a failed bio-weapon,” he said. “There are scientists on the way, experts on the stuff.” He stared at Jennie. “Be brave, honey.”

“I’m going to die, aren’t I?” she asked. Her breath seemed to hurt her throat, and her chest felt tight.

“I don’t know,” Dr. Williams said. He turned to her mother. “Is there anyone else we should call? Was there anyone else in the house this morning?”

“Her father — he had just left for work when we... when...”

“Brothers? Sisters? School?”

“She’s in third grade.”

“The scientists,” Jennie said. “Can they fix it?”

Dr. Williams started to say something, then stopped. He shook his head. When he spoke again he sounded angry, as if he was trying to control himself and couldn’t quite do it.

“They want to see what it looks like,” he said. “What it does. But they have no idea how to stop it.”

“So I’m going to die.” It was not a question this time, but Dr. Williams nodded.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

“They want to watch me die.”

He nodded again.

“I’m so sorry, baby,” her mother said. Jennie could see tears on her cheeks. She looked as if she was trying to control herself and not doing it, too, but where Dr. Williams looked angry, Jennie’s mother looked sad.

Jennie felt tears on her own cheeks, mixing with sweat. She held out her arms, the left still normal, the right a misshapen horror. “Mommy!” she cried.

And without thinking, her mother came forward and hugged her.

Jennie closed her eyes as they embraced, then opened them to see brown goo on her mother’s jaw where Jennie’s right arm had touched.

Jennie saw her mother’s eyes widen with horror as she realized what they had done.

Jennie thought she should probably say she was sorry, but the words would not come.

She was going to die, she didn’t need to be sorry for anything anymore. She was going to die.

But at least she wouldn’t die alone.

*end*